

Permission to Create



By partnering with *Art for Life*, a program affiliated with the North Dakota Council on the Arts, the Northern Lights Arts Council works with Maple Manor Care Center inviting artists to teach at this elderly care facility in Langdon, North Dakota.

Artist residencies run the gamut, from quilting to pottery, and from painting and storytelling to fiber arts. Repeat artists have been great for creating connection with the residents, explains Carol Hart, Executive Director of the Northern Lights Art Council.

Two artists who have created a great rapport with Maple Manor residents are the North Dakota “Wooly Girls,” Janet Jacobson and Diane Schill. They have taught the art of felting at Maple Manor. The Wooly Girls previously led workshops with children and adults in the community, but this was their first opportunity to work with elders in a care facility.

During their first residency, the Wooly Girls taught residents the wet felting technique. Each person designed a square of felt, then the group put it all together to create a landscape mural that is now on display at Maple Manor.



This image shows the hands of an elder at Maple Manor Care Center creating a felted wool mural as part of an artist residency conducted by the Wooly Girls.

“It was interesting seeing how they reacted to doing a section of something when they couldn’t see the whole thing, but it worked really well,” remembers Janet.

The next year they tried the needle felting technique with

the residents. Each person created unique felted flowers, the end product of which was a garden-themed collage. Diane felted a background to feature all the garden creations.

It was in their third year that the Wooly Girls really started to notice a shift in the elders' behavior.

Diane noticed when they first started felting at Maple Manor that the residents would make comments like, "I don't really see a point in doing this." But then something started to change. By year three, the residents were asking fewer questions about purpose and more questions about creative expression.

The group used cookie cutters to create shapes for another collage last year, and many residents were forging their own artistic path. Diane or Janet would recommend something and a resident would respectfully disagree and try something else. This newfound independence of the residents as artists increased with each year the Wooly Girls visited.

"We don't have the same people every time . . . but it seems like there's been a shift in the [Maple Manor] community about creating things. Not just because of what we've done, but I think because of the *Art for Life Program* as a whole," explains Janet.

Because the creativity is growing with each felting project, the Wooly Girls plan to have the residents felt pillows based on their memories this year. They're excited for the residents to fully express their artistic independence in a design all their



This image shows a felted wool mural in progress, which was made by the elders at Maple Manor Care Center during an artist residency conducted by the Wooly Girls.

own.

Carol has also noticed the positive effects the *Art for Life Program* is having at Maple Manor: "Overall, participation in the arts has increased and residents are more willing to come out and try something new . . . there's a group of people who have a positive image for it and are more willing to be involved in the arts, and their quality of life has improved."

In addition to helping residents find their inner artist, the *Art for Life Program* introduces new mediums that allow people to continue being creative even if their hands don't

work as well as they used to. Diane points out that a clay residency conducted by another artist highlighted what a great medium clay can be for residents who have arthritis, “The clay faces that they made were just amazing!”

Over the years, Janet and Diane also have learned an important lesson when it comes to respect. When they first started planning felting workshops, they were faced with the challenge of having to balance ease with dignity.

“There’s always a challenge between making it easy to do and something that’s worth doing, and not oversimplifying it to the point of insulting their intelligence,” says Janet.

The behavior of oversimplification can happen all too often when younger generations interact with elders in our culture. Sometimes people are under the false impression that they need to speak slower or more simply to get their point across, when really these elders are just like the rest of us.

“It doesn’t really strike you until somebody does it to you,” explains Janet. “Your hair turns gray and then they start talking to you like you’re six. And suddenly you realize, ‘Oh, I think I’ve done this to others.’”

As artists and instructors, the Wooly Girls are now very mindful of the balance between making an art project easy enough for all physical abilities, and keeping it challenging enough to avoid insulting anyone.

In addition to felting at Maple Manor, each spring the Wooly Girls bring baby farm animals into the facility. Janet

says that this year they would like to transcribe the stories the residents inevitably tell as they interact with the animals.

They’ve heard tidbits of stories over the past few years—like pet lambs following them into the farmhouse kitchen—but this year, she’d like to be more intentional.

Diane remembers one interaction that continues to stay with her: “One woman loved the little baby chicks. She had one curled up in the crook of her neck, and said that when she was a little girl her mama had chickens and she loved the baby chicks and she would sit in the middle of them and just hold them. And while she was talking, that chick fell asleep in her hands!”

She remembers another individual who had a completely different reaction to the animals. The resident was not pleased with farm animals being inside and yelled, “Get them outta here! Get them critters out!”

Regardless of their love or loathing of the animals, the Wooly Girls see an opportunity to be intentional and learn more about the lives of the residents at Maple Manor.

This new storytelling endeavor is another form of creative independence the Wooly Girls are bringing to the residents. Slowly over time, Janet and Diane have managed to bring these creative people back to life, in an artistic sense.

Janet and Diane have learned many things over the years, but watching this newfound confidence unfold at Maple Manor has been one of the most rewarding aspects of being

Art for Life Program artists.

There is power in the permission to be an artist, and sometimes it takes someone else telling you, “You are an artist, and your creative ideas matter.”

For the residents at Maple Manor, the Woolly Girls have done just that.

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Lauren is a writer and storyteller who earned a Bachelor of Arts in English from St. Olaf College. She is currently working as a communications consultant for SURVIVEiT, a nonprofit that provides online resources for cancer patients. She also mentors elementary children in an after-school program for New Americans. In her free time, she enjoys volunteering as a writer and copy editor for the *High Plains Reader* and teaching creative writing at the YWCA in Fargo, North Dakota. She lives in Moorhead, Minnesota, with her husband Jamison, Kingsley the black lab, and LeBron the cat.

(Images provided courtesy of Janet Jacobson.)

